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SUBJECT: GEORGIANS LOOK TO MAY 21 ELECTIONS

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Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) Summary: A Presidential decree on March 21 set the date for upcoming parliamentary elections on May 21. Against the backdrop of campaign preparations, events are unfolding quickly. The ruling National Movement (UNM) party replaced its Secretary General, effectively sidelining a leading ruling party member. Patriarch Ilia II again called on the government and opposition to cooperate on the election. President Saakashvili introduced a restructured Inter-Agency Task Force on Free and Fair Elections (IATF), and said the group will ensure his personal guarantee of free elections. The Republican Party restated the opposition's support for Georgia's Membership Action Plan in NATO. ODIHR and the Venice Commission both have initial observation teams arriving in April. The OSCE Ambassadors Working Group (OSCE-AWG) plans to address the GOG on election issues in the coming week. In addition, the OSCE-AWG intends to coordinate election observation teams throughout the country. End Summary.

Kirkitadze Out as UNM Secretary General  
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12. (C) On March 28, MP Davit Kirkitadze, Secretary General of the ruling UNM, was appointed Governor of the Kvemo Kartli region, replacing Zurab Melikishvili. Melikishvili will reportedly be placed on the UNM party list. It was reported earlier that Kirkitadze wanted to run as a majoritarian candidate in his native Chiatura single-mandate district. According to reports, Deputy Speaker of Parliament Mikheil Machavariani will take over as party leader of the UNM. (Comment: Post interprets this move as a win for Saakashvili insider MP Giga Bokeria, who is known to have butted heads with Kirkitadze for influence in the UNM. Kvemo Kartli is dominated by the Azeri minority community and was a significant area of support for Saakashvili in the January 5 election. End comment.)

Patriarch Again Tells Government to Compromise  
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13. (C) On March 30 during his Sunday sermon, Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II repeated his call to the government and opposition to resume dialogue on the election (reftel), and to compromise on outstanding issues. Ilia II noted that the opposition's decision to end the hunger strike defused a tense situation. He then stressed that he had also called on the government to take steps to resolve the situation.

President Introduces Election Task Force  
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14. (C) On March 31, President Saakashvili publicly introduced

the revamped Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on Free and Fair Elections to the diplomatic corps. Saakashvili said the government demands democratic elections and he specifically appointed the IATF (reftel) to "guarantee" them. The opposition, led by the Republican and Industrialist parties, immediately denounced the IATF, claiming it is an ineffective enforcer of the election code as evidenced by the fact that the IATF for the presidential election had not provided any results about its activities. The IATF also did not include any opposition or parliamentary members.

#### Republicans Renew Call for MAP in NATO

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15. (U) On March 31, Usupashvili held a briefing and announced that -- despite the current disagreement in Georgia's internal politics -- the Republican Party fully supports Georgia's accession to NATO and called for NATO to grant Georgia a Membership Action Plan. Usupashvili pointed out that this is widely-held view among the opposition parties, who had signed a compact supporting Georgia's MAP last fall. He also stated that the public strongly supported Georgian membership in NATO (77 percent) in the plebiscite held on January 5.

#### ODIHR, CoE Election Observation Teams Arriving in April

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16. (SBU) In a meeting of the OSCE Ambassadors Working Group (OSCE-AWG) on April 1, OSCE announced that ODIHR will have a long-term election observation mission beginning on April 9. Twenty-eight long-term ODIHR observers will arrive in Tbilisi on April 15 and remain until at least May 29. They will stay

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until June 12 in case second round runoffs are needed. ODIHR also intends to request 350 short-term election observers. In addition, the Council of Europe announced that they too will have an election observation team arriving in mid-April for a pre-election survey. The CoE group will meet with multiple parties and then return the week prior to the elections. The CoE is hoping their observers will stay as "long as possible" after the elections.

#### OSCE to Address GOG on Election Issues

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17. (C) At the April 1 OSCE-AWG meeting, other governments raised concern about several technical election issues. These included the complaints process, the precinct results protocols (reftel), Parliament's refusal to schedule the Public Defender's annual presentation on human rights (including the portion on elections), and the recent selection of additional professional members of the District Election Commissions (OSCE called these selections "pre-determined"). The European Commission Ambassador suggested that the OSCE-AWG draft a letter noting these concerns and submit it to the IATF. The letter is being drafted and will be cleared by OSCE-AWG members this week.

#### Coordinating Election Observation Teams

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18. (SBU) In addition, one ambassador suggested that the members of the OSCE-AWG coordinate their missions' observation teams to avoid the duplication of observation efforts seen on January 5. The OSCE-AWG may suggest a plan toward this end at their next meeting.

#### Comment

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19. (C) The opposition now appears to be working full-bore on the upcoming elections. On March 25, opposition leader Salome Zourabichvili told Charge that the United Opposition

must run in the elections and are working toward this end. She noted that since the UNC demanded early elections, it would be ridiculous to boycott them now as the Labor Party suggested.

TEFFT